GOD AND COMMON SENSE

June 8, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you..." --I Peter 3:15 (RSV)

Scripture
I Peter 3:8-16

One of the great and wonderful mysteries in the world is how human beings learn...how a baby magically begins to translate sounds into meaning and before long is imitating those sounds... "Yes" - "No" - "Milk" - "Please"... A very few months after birth brand new human beings take a quantum leap ahead of the rest of creation by learning. Now I know that brilliant scholars spend their lives trying to pin down how this happens and I do not wish to over-simplify something that is anything but simple, but my own curiosity led me to ask a distinguished educator one time what a mature person knows that a twelve year old does not know. (At the time it may have been that one of my own twelve year olds was not learning what she or he was supposed to be learning.) In any event, my distinguished dinner companion lept to the challenge and said that at eleven or twelve youngsters are primarily concerned with themselves; their interest in the world is limited to how the world relates to them, impinges on them, effects them. It is normal, she said, for an adolescent not to share an adult's sensitivity to how the world is effected, say, by one's attire or hair style. It is fairly futile, for instance, to say things like "What do you suppose people will think when they see your punk-purple spike hair-do?" because that is a way of thinking that is not yet in place for the young adolescent. So, remember that on your next walk along Oak Street Beach - and also that very wise observation by Samuel Coleridge to the effect that "Young people possessing anything like perfect taste merely reflect the lack of real talent."

It's natural and healthy and good at twelve, my educator friend went on, to think first in terms of myself. Later I will come to terms with a world out there. First, the little picture: then the big picture.

She went on to illustrate with mathematics. Youngsters struggle with the components and their own mathematical skills first and then the exciting part comes later when you get the whole picture. I assured her that there were reasonably intellignet people who never got to that part: that the world is full of people who first confronted the possibility of ultimate despair somewhere in the middle of high school trigonometry. She told me computers were changing that. Then we talked about music and

athletics and history. Youngsters struggle to learn to read music, count, develop technique. It is fairly contained and not always gratifying. And then one grand day the third trumpet player finds himself in an orchestra, and his counting out 34 measures of rests and playing three consecutive quarter notes, properly articulated, is part of something wonderful and glorious and whole and beautiful - written a century and a half ago by a German whose name was Beethoven. Or the Junior High guard, after spending hours learning to dribble and pass and shoot and how to move the ball down court quickly after a rebound, finds herself in a game and the pattern works and the ball gets down court and the choreography is perfect and the last player actually scores. Or the reluctant student of history who has memorized all the Civil War dates finds himself at Gettysburg and the dates and the numbers and the weather and who was flanking whom during that awesome final charge suddenly, gloriously, is a reality.

What wonderful moments those are! How fortunate that we continue to develop and grow and that there are experiences of integration and assimilation. How good it is that we don't try to perform our mathematic calculations or listen to music or do our grocery shopping on the basis of our world view at the age of twelve. How wise it is that parents and educators don't give up on us when at the age of twelve we announce, - "I'm not going to study this stuff any more - because it doesn't mean anything."

That is precisely what happens to many - in fact to virtually all people, in regard to religion. Theological development and religious growth stop at about the age of twelve. The pattern is nearly universal. Youngsters whose families go to church are brought to Church School for a dozen years through the process of confirmation or its equivalent. At the onset of adolescence a lot of things adults want youngsters to do look irrelevant, pointless, uninteresting and oppressive and a protest is launched. That protest part of staking out an identity, an important part of the developmental process. Now, going to church school does not seem as important as eating properly, or getting enough sleep nor does it have the coercive authority of the law going for it that attending school does - and so it looms in the sights of the healthy adolescent as a vulnerable target, the place where a stand may be taken. And so going to church is sacrificed by weary parents before the relentless onslaught of adolescence. People stop coming.

But they don't stop thinking about religion, or asking religious questions. On the contrary, I have discovered that from adolescence through college questions of profound theological significance are always near the surface. I was part of a Jay Cees project once that persuaded the Guidance Counselor in the local high school to conduct a survey for us to discover what the kids were really thinking - so that we could help them. We assumed they needed weekly dances, or an after school canteen. The most frequent response to the question: "What do you worry about..what do you wish you could discuss with someone" was "What is going to happen to me after I die?" But now a devastating pattern has been established. The religious skills, the familiarity with the resources, stopped at age twelve but the questions keep getting tougher. Many adults seem to have come to the curious conclusion that what they learned and experienced theologically at age twelve is all there is. Some, of course, continue to grow. Some

return later and resume the journey. Many stay with the church, get by theologically, but not in a way that is stimulating and challenging or even very interesting. Like Alice in Wonderland, when the Queen claims to be one hundred and four and Alice can't believe it, they shut their eyes tightly, draw a deep breath, swallow hard and try to believe again whatever it is that the church seems intent on their believing.

"Be ready at all times to answer any one who asks you to explain the hope that is in you." The text this morning is a bit of advice in a letter written to Christians in the First Century. The first and most critical task of the earliest church was to know what it believed clearly enough to be able to communicate it to a world that had never heard of it before. The first job of the first Christians was to take a story about a Jewish Rabbi and retell it in a way that would persuade Greek speaking citizens of Rome that it was true. They succeeded. They succeeded, at least in part, because the intellectuals were compelled intellectually to deal with the Gospel. They succeeded, someone has suggested, because they out organized and out thought everybody else.

The requirement hasn't changed much. If the First Century was hostile toward Christianity, the later part of the Twentieth is skeptical. If theirs was uninterested, ours is preoccupied. Our world no longer makes religious assumptions. In fact, the common assumption seems to be that agnosticism is the only reasonable position, and that the truly brave and honest will affirm atheism.

What Christianity has always maintained is that the human mind, the intellect, is a legitimate avenue into the inner person, the soul. Jesus himself told stories and taught in a way that required a fairly nimble mind to understand. "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, and mind," is the Great Commandment and part of what ought to be going on inside the church is that intriguing task of loving God with our minds. The mind is not the only avenue to your soul. You have heart, spirit, emotion. To the thoughtless secularism of our age Christianity suggests that truth is not exclusively established and celebrated by the intellect. There are limitations to what your thought processes can do for you. We have always known that when it comes to talking about beauty, love, ecstasy. We've always known that precise botanical data does not accurately describe one of those incredible Irises out in the Garth. Chemical analysis of hormonal stimulation doesn't come close to defining what people experience who are in love. The mind isn't all there is to us. But neither are our emotions. Presbyterians have held out for a balance between intellect and emotion: mind and heart. Pascal wrote long ago: "There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in."

One of the great things about our tradition is that it does celebrate and value the human intellect within the context of faith. John Calvin, our founder, was a scholarly lawyer. Among the revolutionary ideas he conceived and put to work in Sixteenth Century Geneva was public education. The Reformers broke with a thousand years of tradition by insisting that people should understand what they believed. Luther translated the Bible into German so people could read it. Calvin organized an Academy and taught Catechism so that people could understand their faith. We have had

a strong commitment to public education because of our tradition. And so, if there is a crisis in public education in this country, we latter-day Calvinists are the ones who ought to be most exercised about it - and we ought to be suggesting to anyone who will listen that there is a connection between the spiritual health of the republic and the health of its educational institution.

Of course whether or not you think there is a crisis in public education depends on who you are listening to. But just this week I read a report of a National Science Foundation survey which discovered that Americans are gearing up for the 21st Century with new scientific illiteracy...illustrated - "Large numbers of Americans do not understand what a molecule is or radiation. Two-thirds read astrological columns and one in fifteen changes behavior because of astrological advice. One half of us believe UFO's carry visitors from outer space and that some people have lucky numbers." [Washington Post, 6/3/86] I didn't like knowing that our scientific sophistication is not as high as I assumed. So I called the library to inquire about literacy in America and discovered that our literacy rate is below that of a lot of countries - the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Belgium, Sweden and Cuba. The newspapers told us Thursday that there will be serious opposition throughout the State of Illinois to a rather modest proposal that achieving passing grades in Math and English is slightly more important in public schools than participating in inter-scholastic athletics. One of the more interesting after dinner speeches I ever heard was delivered to a Chamber of Commerce group by George Steinbrenner, owner of the New York Yankees - on the topic of Youth and the Future. He was predictable for about four minutes, told great storiesabout baseball players and the competive spirit and how America is number one. And then to the utter dismay of his audience he talked for 20 minutes about how the people in his audience - business people were working against the welfare of young people - by enthusiastically supporting the reduction in aid to public education at the Federal, State and Local level. They were, it seemed to him, working for the medocrity of our people, and the eventual demise of the whole system. It was a stunning experience. The quality of public education is a matter of religious significance for the sons and daughters of John Calvin.

In addition, Presbyterians started colleges and universities wherever they went on this continent. At our best we have not only refused to shelter the faith from the rigorous critical examination of the scholar, we have welcomed it, sponsored it. At our best we affirmed the Godliness of an open-minded, inquiring, free academic process. It is a matter of faith for us to trust the persuasive power of the Gospel in any environment. At our best, we do not believe a Christian college should regulate what is taught, or monitor the religion convictions of its professors. We get very nervous when universities do not allow the free expression of ideas which may be offensive to the church sponsoring the university. That doesn't sound like freedom or faithfulness to us. At our best, we have been willing to trust that God will make his truth known and reveal himself when minds are stretched and intellects challenged. I continue to believe that the Christian faith can stand alone in the market place of ideas. I do not believe that religion that is worth anything requires protection from rigorous examination. I refuse to believe that there is anything science

can discover about the world and how we got here, or the universe and how it began, that will threaten the truth God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

In fact, I would argue the reasonability of what we believe. I would argue that the Christian understanding of the human condition is the best and most useful and most accurate: that our insight into humanity - made in the divine image, enormously creative, with infinite potential, - yet flawed, inclined toward destruction - is far more useful than any other. I would argue that the Christian perception of human relations: the need for grace, forgiveness, acceptance and selflessness, is the most profound approach to the subject.

I would venture to argue that Jesus was demonstrably accurate about human experience and human nature and human potential when he said improbable things like:

"...if you want to gain your life, you must give it away."

"...it is more blessed to give than to receive."

"...if your enemy strikes your check, turn the other also."

Is there any serious doubt about the practical wisdom of traditional Chrsitian ideas about compassion and peace and justice? Is there any serious doubt that unless something like the Sermon on the Mount begins to be taken seriously - economically and politically - there will be no future? When in God's name will the people in the ruling elite of South Africa, who are leading that country into a revolution that everyone agrees will cost 5 million lives, see that the only people talking common sense are the church people? When, in God's name, will we at least entertain the notion that Bishops who talk about peace and economic justice are talking common sense - compared with politicians who seriously propose to start the arms race again. When, in God's name, will we see that it is not common sensical to suggest that with 50,000 nuclear warheads on hand, what we and the Russians need - both need - are more.

"Be ready to answer any one who asks you to explain the hope you have in you." Part of the reason we are Christian is that the hope in us, is also the hope of the world.

The late John Baillie was a Scotsman who thought brilliantly about the faith and the life of the mind. I have always been intrigued by an essay of his I read a long time ago in which he argued that right religion does not have to be forced on anyone intellectually. Baillie said that he believed there was and is something fundamentally true about this business. It doesn't ultimately conflict with my ability to reason. In the final analysis, my own reason confirms it. He wrote: "I am under obligation to love my neighbor as myself...contrary to natural inclinations. But in my heart of hearts I know that it is true. In spite of myself, I am more certain of this than of anything science or philosophy could tell me." [A Reasoned Faith, Pascal and St. Paul, p. 117]

These are important times -- critical times -- dangerous times. Part of the challenge and the excitement in being a Christian today is

intellectual. It is to be alert - to read everything - to understand what is happening in the world - to deal, Christianly, with a world which often simply writes religion out of the script...

God calls us to love him with heart, soul and mind. The summons of Jesus Christ to follow him includes our mental ability, our intellect. The challenge is at least twenty centuries old. "Be ready at all times to answer any one who asks you to explain the hope you have in you." In fact, the argument is easily made that our community, our nation, our world, needs people who can do that more despartely than ever before.

Amen.

God eternal, along with hearts to love you and voices to sing your praise, you have given us minds to know you. Give us courage and strength to use our minds to love you and to live faithfully, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.